

DR. RUTHERFORTHS
DISCOURSE
ON
MIRACLES.



N^o 19

The Credibility of Miracles defended
Against the Author of
Philosophical Essays
IN A
DISCOURSE
DELIVERED AT THE
PRIMARY VISITATION
OF
THE RIGHT REVEREND
FATHER IN GOD
T H O M A S
LORD BISHOP OF ELY
IN ST. MICHAELS CHURCH
CAMBRIDGE
AVG. XXIX.
MDCCLI.

BY
T. RUTHERFORTH D.D. CHAPLAIN TO HER ROYAL
HIGHNESS THE PRINCESS DOWAGER OF WALES.

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MDCCLI.

The Credibility of Miracles defended

Against the Assertion of

Philosophical Writers

IN A

DISCOURSE

II

PRIMARY NARRATION

OF THE

THE RIGHT REPORTED

FACTS

THOMAS

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TO
THE RIGHT REVEREND
FATHER IN GOD
T H O M A S
LORD BISHOP OF ELY.

MY LORD,

AS I am encouraged to print
the following discourse by
the favourable notice, which you
were pleased to take of it, in your
most excellent charge to your
clergy, before whom I delivered
it; this alone might be a sufficient
reason for me to beg, that I may
have

DEDICATION.

have the honour of sending it abroad under your Lordship's patronage. But I had another reason for desiring to address myself to your Lordship upon this occasion: it would be, I thought, the most public, and therefore the best, opportunity of testifying my just sense of the many and signal instances of goodness and generosity, which I have received from your Lordship. The favours, which you have been pleased to confer upon me, are great indeed in themselves, and may justly claim the most sincere acknowledgments and the best returns of gratitude, that I am able to make: but the graceful

DEDICATION.

ful manner, in which they were conferred, has doubled the value of them. Your Lordship's noble and truly christian spirit has in this respect, as in many others, most eminently distinguished you from the rest of the world, by engaging you to seek for opportunities of exercising your bounty, and to prevent, not only the solicitations, but even the wishes of those, who stand in need of your protection and assistance. That they may long be blessed with such a patron and friend, as they are sure of finding in your Lordship, and that you may long enjoy all the happiness, which providence
can

DEDICATION.

can bestow upon one of its best
and most faithful instruments in
doing good; is, my Lord, the
constant and devouteſt wiſh of

Your Lordſhip's moſt obliged

and moſt dutiful ſervant

THOMAS RUTHERFORTH.

ST. JOHNS COLLE.

SEPT. XVIII.

MDCCLI.

THE
CREDIBILITY of MIRACLES
DEFENDED.

JOHN XX. 30, 31.

MANY OTHER SIGNS TRULY DID JESUS
IN THE PRESENCE OF HIS DISCIPLES,
WHICH ARE NOT WRITTEN IN THIS
BOOK: BUT THESE ARE WRITTEN,
THAT YE MIGHT BELIEVE, THAT
JESUS CHRIST IS THE SON OF GOD.

THE sacred historian hath here informed us
with what view he recorded the miracles
of Christ: he designed to convince his readers,
that the person, who could do such mighty works,
must have a commission from God, to teach his
will to mankind. And the defenders of christianity
have always imagined, that the miracles, which
are related in the new testament, and are there
said to have been wrought by Christ and his apo-
stles, may be urged as an undeniable evidence in
favour of our religion; provided they can make
it appear, that the reality of them is evinced by
such testimony, as would be sufficient to establish
the truth of any matter of fact, beyond all con-
tradiction.

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But the state of this question hath been lately much altered. Instead of being called upon to clear up the testimony, which supports the miracles of Christ and his apostles; we are now challenged to shew, that any testimony whatsoever can be sufficient to prove the truth of these, or of any other miracles.

“^a A miracle, we are told, is a violation of the laws of nature: for nothing is esteemed a miracle, if it ever happens in the common course of things. And consequently; since a firm and unalterable experience hath established those laws; there must be a firm and unalterable experience against every miraculous event. But in the judgments, which we pass upon matters of fact, such an experience as this amounts to a full and direct proof. We have therefore, from the nature of the fact, a full and direct proof against the existence of any miracle. If then a miracle, with such a proof against it, can be rendered credible; it must be by an opposite proof, which is superiour. Therefore no proof from report can evince the existence of a miracle; unless it over-balances the opposite proof from the nature of the fact: or, no testimony can be sufficient to establish the belief of a miracle; unless the falsehood of the testimony would be more miraculous, than the event, which it endeavours to establish.”

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^a Hume's Philos. Essays pag. 173 — 207.

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The confidence, with which this difficulty is urged against the belief of the gospel, hath made it our duty to examine into the merits of it. I intend therefore, in the following discourse, to employ your thoughts upon this subject, by laying before you some observations upon the measures of credibility, which will assist us in shewing, that this argument is inconclusive, and that no supernatural degree of testimony is necessarily required to prove the existence of a miracle.

Where we have no knowledge or certainty of a fact, by having been eye-witnesses of it; the measures of credibility, made use of to form a judgment upon the truth or falshood of it, are the conformity or consistency of it with our experience; the conformity or consistency of it with our knowledge in general; and the testimony of other men, who vouch the evidence of their senses.

Matters of fact have three different degrees of credibility, in the nature of the thing, arising from their conformity or consistency with our experience.

First; there are some events, which we have always found to be brought about steadily and constantly, at stated times, and in certain places, without the least irregularity or exception. The existence of these events is taken for granted; we assure ourselves upon the evidence of such an uniform experience, that they will happen at the usual

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time and place, without requiring any testimony to prove it. We never think of disputing whether the sun will rise to morrow morning, or of disbelieving, that the tide came in yesterday. The exact likeness between these facts and others, which we have seen and known to be true, induces us to admit them without any hesitation: we take them for truth, because they have, in all respects, a full and perfect resemblance of it.

Secondly; some events have a less exact and less striking likeness of the truth; we find them conformable to our experience in most respects, but not in all. It is most agreeable to what hath commonly been observed to happen, that, in England, there should be frost in some particular week of december, and thunder in some particular week of june. The general resemblance of the truth, which we find in events of this sort, makes us think them likely to be true, and inclines us to believe them. But because they have been sometimes known to fail, and are therefore in some points unlike the truth; the credibility, which they have, in the nature of the thing, does not amount to a full proof of their existence. When we have had no opportunity of observing them ourselves, and cannot ascertain their existence by the evidence of our own senses; we are ready to believe, upon the evidence of our former experience, that they have happened: but our belief is never so fixed as to be raised to any

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any degree of assurance or confidence without the help of testimony.

Thirdly ; in respect of some events we have equal experience both ways ; and in respect of some others we have no experience either way. ^b That it should thunder on a man's right hand, is not more conformable to our experience than that it should thunder on his left. That there lived in Rome such a man as Julius Cæsar ; that he was a general, and won a battle against another called Pompey ; are facts, about which we have no experience at all. Such events as these are looked upon to be credible in themselves, only because they furnish no cause of doubt from the nature of the thing. They might perhaps with more propriety be called indifferent in themselves : because, as, from the nature of the thing, they furnish no cause of doubt, so neither do they furnish any cause of belief. But whether we call them credible or indifferent ; they are confessedly capable of being proved by a fair testimony.

These are the degrees of credibility, which arise from the conformity or consistency of an event with our experience : and we shall find upon enquiry, that the same degrees of credibility arise from its conformity or consistency with our knowledge. For the credibility of events is indeed nothing more than their likeness to the truth. Whenever therefore we find them stamped with this image,

^b Lock's Essay, B. IV. C. XVI. § 8.

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it gives them a currency: whether the truth, whose image they bear, is the object of experience or the object of knowledge; whether we came into possession of it by the immediate perception of our senses, or by induction and conclusions of reason.

First; some facts have in all respects an exact conformity with our knowledge: such as these are admitted for true, upon the credit of their full and perfect resemblance of the truth, without any testimony to vouch for them. When by the help of observations, and by reasoning upon such general conclusions as are deducible from them, we have demonstrated, that the moon is retained in its orbit by the force of gravity; the resemblance, which we find, in all points, between the motion of the moon round the earth, and the motions of the satellites round jupiter, determines us to believe, with an assurance little inferiour to certainty, that these bodies are likewise retained in their respective orbits by the same force of gravity.

Secondly; when a fact is conformable to our knowledge in most respects, but not in all; its likeness to the truth makes it credible, and inclines us to believe it. The want of a more exact and minute likeness may, if we consider only the nature of the fact, leave some room to doubt of its existence: but the report of credible witnesses never fails to over-rule this doubt and to establish the belief of it. Whatever probability we may have
from

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from experience, that there will be frost, in England, in some particular week of december, and thunder in some particular week of june; we have the same probability from our knowledge of the globe, that, in the opposite southern latitude, there will be frost in some particular week of june, and thunder in some particular week of december. One of these facts is made credible by its conformity with our experience, and the other by its conformity with our knowledge; both of them are so far credible in themselves, that they may easily be established by testimony; and neither of them can be effectually established without it.

Thirdly; some events may happen either way, and yet be equally conformable to our knowledge; others are so far consistent with it, that they may be true, without contradicting any other truth, that we are certain of. Such events as these, being indifferent or credible in themselves, on account of their conformity or consistency with our knowledge, furnish no cause of doubt from the nature of the thing, and are therefore capable of being proved by a fair testimony. When a man plays, with an equal chance against him; his winning or his losing are equally conformable with our knowledge in the doctrine of chances. The planet mars may have a satellite consistently with all our knowledge of the causes, which govern the system of the world. Neither of these facts have such a credibility in themselves as can determine us rather

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to believe, than to doubt of them: but both of them are so far credible in the nature of the thing, from their conformity or consistency with our knowledge, that a fair testimony would prove in one instance, that the player hath lost, and in the other, that mars hath a satellite.

Perhaps it may be said, that we cannot come at any certainty or knowledge of the real existence of facts, but from the evidence of our senses; that knowledge or experience of facts must therefore be only different names for the same thing; and consequently that conformity with knowledge is not a distinct measure of credibility from conformity with experience. It must indeed be allowed, that all our reasonings, about the laws and order of nature, will be precarious and fantastical, unless they proceed upon experiments and observation. But when we have thus gained some footing, or ground, as it were, to stand upon; our reason can survey from thence many parts of nature, which our senses were unable to discover. Suppose we have determined, by observations, the proportion between the respective distances of the planets from the sun, and the periodical times, in which they describe their orbits: our experience of facts stops here; but our knowledge of them reaches farther. Our reason, proceeding upon these informations of sense, demonstrates the law of that force, which continually urges the planets towards the sun. Thus we arrive at a certain knowledge of this latter fact, though

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though the former only hath been, or indeed can be, the object of experience. But, when I distinguish between experience and knowledge, I would not be understood to mean, that they differ any otherwise, than as the part differs from the whole. Every certain perception of the truth, whether we obtain it by our reason or our senses, is knowledge. All our experience therefore must be allowed to be knowledge. But then I would contend, that all our knowledge is not experience. For as some truths, relating to real existence, are perceived immediately by our senses; so there are others, which we discover by induction and conclusions of reason. And since the resemblance of truth is the inducement of probability, upon which we admit facts to be true; conformity with experience is planely too scanty a measure of credibility; because experience is not the only way of discovering truth.

I designed, by the foregoing observations, to establish these two conclusions;—First; that events are made as credible, in the nature of the thing, by their conformity or consistency with our knowledge, as they are by their conformity or consistency with our experience;—And secondly; that, when events, which are conformable to our knowledge or consistent with it, are supported by a fair testimony, our assent to them is well-grounded.

Allow us the truth of these two conclusions, which we have proved already; and allow us be-

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fides, what we can prove, if you deny it, that we have a demonstrative knowledge of the existence, the power, the wisdom, and the goodness of God; and by the help of these principles, we shall be able to unravel all the fallacy of your argument, and to shew you, that miracles do not require any supernatural degree of testimony to establish our belief of them.

A firm and invariable experience amounts, you say, to a full and direct proof. — But no event, for so your argument proceeds, can be called a miracle, unless there is a firm and invariable experience against it. — From hence you conclude, that we must have, in the nature of the fact, a full and direct proof against the existence of every miracle. — The whole stress of your argument rests upon these two fundamental principles, and upon this conclusion, which you deduce from them. Let us therefore enquire into the truth of your principles, and consider how well they will establish your conclusion.

A firm and invariable experience amounts to a full proof; — You would have done well to inform us what it is, which such an experience proves in so decisive a manner. You may have observed the ordinary course of nature, with diligence and exactness, and may have discovered what sort of events are produced, steadily and constantly, in the usual train of causes and effects. From hence you may determine, with the highest probability, that no events, which are repugnant to these,

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these, can be produced by the same causes operating in the same manner, or by the ordinary powers of nature, which are the objects of your experience. But your proof from experience can go no farther. When you have observed what events are, constantly and uniformly, brought about by the operation of those laws, which the author of nature originally established; by the qualities, which he impressed upon matter; or by the powers, which he bestowed upon his creatures; you have then acquired a firm and invariable experience. But such an experience will never prove, that no events, which are repugnant to these, can be brought about by the immediate interposition of him, who established these laws, and can over-rule them; who impressed these qualities, and can suspend their operations; who bestowed these powers, and can either control or augment them. For the force of an argument, deduced from experience, can extend no farther, than the experience extends, from whence you deduce it. Your experience of the ordinary powers of nature may be a decisive proof, in respect of those powers, which are the immediate objects of it: but it can be no proof at all, in respect of a power superiour to nature, which is not the immediate object of experience, but of demonstrative knowledge.

Your other fundamental principle is, — That no event can be looked upon as a miracle, unless there is a firm and unalterable experience against it. —

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The expression here is vague and indeterminate; and we may perhaps mistake your meaning, unless we ascertain it, by looking back to the first principles, from whence this position is inferred. You define a miracle to be a violation of the laws of nature; and, because a firm and unalterable experience hath established those laws, you infer, that there must be such an experience against every miraculous event. You have here shewn evidently, that the experience, upon which we establish our notions of the laws of nature, is repugnant to every miraculous event; or, that every miracle is inconsistent with our experience of the common and visible train of causes and effects. But we must caution you, when you apply this inference, not to confound experience with knowledge, or the common course and laws of nature with the power of him, who is the father of nature, and established its laws. You may certainly infer, from your definition of a miracle, that no event can be called by this name, unless it is inconsistent with our experience of the common course of nature. But the same definition will not justify the only inference, which can serve your purpose; you cannot infer from it, that every miracle is inconsistent with our knowledge of the power of God.

We have now examined your fundamental principles separately, and have seen how far they are true: let us next consider them together, and try what conclusion will come out from them. Suppose

pose then your argument to be thus stated. — A firm and unalterable experience of the common course of nature is a full and direct proof, that no event, which is inconsistent with it, can be brought about by any power, which is the object of our knowledge, or which we know of — But we have a constant and unalterable experience of the common course of nature to oppose to every miraculous event. — Your regular conclusion from hence would be, that we have a full and direct proof, against the likelihood or possibility of bringing about a miraculous event by any power, which is the object of our knowledge. — But such a conclusion, though it is regularly deduced from the principles laid down, is not true: because one of the principles, from whence you deduce it, is false. A firm and unalterable experience of the common course of nature is indeed a direct proof, that no event, which is inconsistent with the usual train of causes and effects, can be brought about by any of the ordinary powers of nature, which are the objects of this experience. But we have already shewn you, that the same experience is no proof at all, against the likelihood or possibility of bringing about such an event by a power, which is superiour to the common course of nature, a power, which we can demonstrate to exist, and which is consequently the object of our knowledge.

Let us try whether your conclusion will succeed better, if the principles, from which you deduce

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duce it, are stated in another manner. — A firm and invariable experience of the common course of nature is a full and direct proof, that no event, which is inconsistent with it, can be produced by the ordinary powers of nature, which are the objects of this experience. — But every miraculous event is inconsistent with our knowledge of all the powers, that exist. — The logicians would tell you, that no regular conclusion can be drawn from these premises; because your syllogism will have four terms in it. And common sense will tell you, that no true conclusion can be drawn from them; because one of them is false. We allow indeed, that every miracle must, from the notion of it, be inconsistent with our experience of the common course of nature: but you have not proved, and we think you cannot prove, that it must likewise, from the notion of it, be inconsistent with our demonstrative knowledge of the power of God.

There is still this third shape, in which your argument may be stated. — A firm and unalterable experience of the common course of nature is a full and direct proof, that no event, which is inconsistent with it, can be produced by the ordinary powers of nature, which are the objects of this experience. — But every miraculous event must, from the notion of it, be inconsistent with our experience of the common course of nature. — We grant, that your premises are true, when they are thus stated. But if you would conclude, — that

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—that we have a full and direct proof, against the production of a miracle by any powers, which are the objects of our knowledge; — such a conclusion must be false; because it contains more than is contained in the premises. Your premises relate only to the ordinary powers of nature, which are the objects of experience; but your conclusion extends itself to a power, which is superiour to the common course of nature, and is the object of our knowledge. The only regular conclusion, which can be deduced from these premises, is, — that we have a full and direct proof, against the production of a miracle by any of the ordinary powers of nature, which are the objects of our senses, or of common experience. — You must content yourself with this conclusion: for when the principles, from whence you argue, are so explained as to be true, they will justify no other. And this is such a conclusion, as the defenders of christianity have no reason to be afraid of.

In answering this argument, I have laid open the grounds of our assent to the existence of a miracle. Such an event is inconsistent with our experience of the common course of things, and would therefore be, in itself, incredible, and incapable of being proved by any testimony; if we knew nothing of any power existing in the universe, besides those, which are employed in carrying on the visible train of causes and effects. But knowledge reaches farther than experience: reason
leads

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leads us on from those powers, which are the objects of sense, to another, which is superiour to them, to the power of him, who, as he at first established the laws, and settled the course of what we commonly mean by the word nature, can therefore, when he pleases, suspend or over-rule them. The existence of a miracle hath a general conformity or consistency with our knowledge of such a power : and this conformity or consistency with our knowledge gives it credibility enough, in the nature of the thing, to render it capable of being proved by a fair testimony.

From hence it appears, that when we reject any miraculous event as spurious, which comes to us well attested ; our reason for this conduct either is not, or ought not to be, any pretended proof against it, from the general nature of all miracles. For a miracle, considered merely as a supernatural change in the common course of things, is consistent with our knowledge of God's power : and no events, which are consistent with our knowledge, furnish any cause of doubt or suspicion about their existence, and much less any presumption or proof against it, from the nature of the thing. And yet we reject the miracles and prodigies, which we find related in pagan histories, and popish legends ; notwithstanding some of them are supported by such a testimony, as might, if we were to give ourselves the trouble of examining it, be found unexceptionable in itself, or sufficient, at least, to establish the truth of
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any common matter of fact. Upon what grounds then, it may be asked, can we justify our rejecting these miracles; if there is no presumption against them, from the nature of miracles in general, and we either do not examine the testimony, which supports them, or find no exceptions against it, when we do? They, who make this enquiry, might, if they attended to the matter, find a third reason for rejecting many particular miracles, besides the two, which are here suggested. Though we have no objections, from the nature of the thing, that can be urged with any force against miracles in general; yet there are frequently such circumstances appear in the relation of particular miracles, as will afford unanswerable objections to the truth of them. If the circumstances of any particular miracle do either directly, or by necessary consequence, exclude the power of every being, who can change the common course of things; such a miracle, not from the general nature of all miracles, but from its own particular circumstances, becomes inconsistent with our knowledge, and incapable of being proved by any testimony whatever.

“ Dionysius of Halicarnassus reports, that in
 “ the war between the Romans and the Latins, the
 “ Gods Castor and Pollux appeared visibly on
 “ white horses, and fought on the side of the
 “ Romans; who by their assistance gained a complete

“ Middleton’s free Enquiry pag. 218.

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"plete victory." It is not any defect in the testimony, when applied to the miracle, which determines us to reject it; whilst, upon the authority of the same testimony, we admit the battle and the victory: for we reject the miracle, either without enquiring at all into the testimony, by which it is supported; or, if upon enquiry, we should find few or no objections against the testimony, yet we should still reject it. Neither can we reasonably be determined in this case by any general presumption or proof, from the nature of the thing, against the existence of all miracles: for miracles have been shewn to be, in themselves, as consistent with our knowledge, and consequently as credible, as many other matters of fact. But the particular miracle in question is attended with a circumstance, which directly excludes the power of God from being concerned in the production of it. Castor and Pollux have not, that we know of, any power of changing the settled course of things: and for want of such a power in the principal agents, the fact, as it is related, is inconsistent with our knowledge, and incapable of being proved by any degree of human testimony.

The like exception runs through almost all the pagan miracles. And if in any instances we believe what is reported of their oracles; we must first have rendered these facts consistent with our knowledge, by finding out such reasons, as may persuade us, that the great deceiver of mankind, though he

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is subject to the power of God, who can at any time say to him, — Hitherto shalt thou go and no farther, — hath yet a power, when he is permitted to use it, of changing the common course of things, and of producing such events, as could not have been produced by any of the visible powers of nature, which are the objects of our experience.

Many of the popish miracles are rendered incredible, in the same manner, by having some circumstance connected with them, which directly excludes the power of God. When the miracles, pretended to be wrought at the tomb of Abbé Paris, are found to have been effectually suppressed, only by walling up that part of the church, where the tomb of the saint, who was supposed to work them, was placed^d; this circumstance cannot be reconciled with our knowledge of God's power: for his purposes, we are sure, could not have been defeated by building a wall.

Many more of these legendary miracles are attended with such circumstances, as exclude the power of God, by necessary consequence, from the production of them. When a set of men have nothing else to recommend them, besides their having devoted themselves to such a way of life, as plainly defeats the end, for which they and all mankind were sent into the world, by making them always useless, and commonly burdensome to society: if they should pretend, that God in-

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^d Observations on St. Paul's Conversion. pag. 64, 65.

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terposes in their favour, and works miracles to establish their credit; a better testimony, than the monks can, for the most part, produce in support of their legends, would not determine a wise man to believe them. Such an interposition would be repugnant to our knowledge of the wisdom and goodness of God, who contrives all his works with a view to the general happiness, and suffers no part of the world to be idle; but requires, as far as reason can teach us his will, that men and brutes, and creatures of what condition soever, should each, in their proper station, concur with him in labouring to promote the same important end. But where the wisdom and goodness of God are thus plainly excluded, no testimony can convince us, that his power was concerned.

The truth is; if we study to avoid, as much as may be, the trouble of examining the several popish miracles distinctly, and indolently please ourselves with any thing, which promises to confute them all at once; we shall be easily led to take part with those, who under the specious pretence of defending the protestant religion, would unsettle the foundations of christianity itself, and to maintain, as they do, that there is such a proof or presumption, from the nature of the thing, against all miracles in general, as will make we know not what degree of testimony necessary to establish them. Whereas, if we would contend, as with reason we may, that the popish miracles, which
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are best attested, are each of them connected with some such circumstances, as render it either directly, or by necessary consequence, inconsistent with our knowledge of God's power; we should then be able both to defend ourselves as protestants, and to give an answer to every one, who shall ask us a reason of our faith in the miracles of Christ and his apostles. For enough hath, I hope, been said to make it appear; that, whatever becomes of these legendary fables, when they are confuted by arguments deduced from the particular circumstances of each of them; yet miracles, considered merely as changes in the common course of nature, are so far consistent with our knowledge of God's power, as to furnish no cause of doubt from the nature of the thing: and that consequently, when they are attended with none of those circumstances, which either directly, or by necessary consequence exclude his power; more especially if the end, proposed by them, is conformable to our notions of his wisdom and goodness; a fair testimony, though it is not a supernatural one, will be sufficient, not only to fix our assent, but to raise it likewise into assurance and confidence.

It is not my business at present to enquire what precise degree of testimony is requisite for this purpose. All that I proposed was, to bring the question concerning miracles back to the old state of it, by shewing, that there is no proof or presumption, from the general nature of such events, against

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against the existence of them. And if this hath been shewn effectually, the enquiry, in which we are principally concerned, is, whether the miracles of Christ and his apostles are supported by such a testimony, as would be sufficient to establish the truth of any matter of fact, beyond all contradiction. But this question hath been so well examined, and so judiciously settled already, by much more able hands than mine; that, if either my subject would lead me, or your patience would allow me, yet their labours have rendered it needless, to spend any time in enlarging upon it.

THE END.

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